New Orleans

Planning for a Better Future

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION ■ SEPTEMBER 2006

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The wreckage of Katrina.

One story is well known: In the early morning hours of August 29, 2005, a ferocious hurricane slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast. By 8 a.m., the eye of the storm had passed 40 miles southeast of the central business district of the city of New Orleans. Within hours, violent storm surges broke through the system of levees and floodwalls designed to protect the city, and water began emptying into the city basin, eventually rising in some places to 20 feet. By the time the water leveled off, about 80 percent of the city was inundated and would remain that way for the next four to six weeks.

The scale of the physical disaster and the immensity of human suffering, caused initially by Hurricane Katrina and then exacerbated three weeks later by Hurricane Rita, were staggering. In all, some 90,000 square miles in five heavily populated Gulf Coast states were physically destroyed. In New Orleans itself, 1,500 people were dead, and more than 250,000 homes were either destroyed or considered unlivable. The extent of the devastation to a major American city was unprecedented in modern times.

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Katrina exposed the city's deepest flaws to the world, laying bare the grinding poverty and segregation that had created an entrenched and vulnerable population in New Orleans. Long before the last of the floodwaters were pumped out, it became apparent that while many neighborhoods were struck hard, low-income and minority communities had been hit the hardest, and faced the most formidable recovery prospects.

But there is another story, less well known: the monumental challenge of urban planning that lay ahead. As residents began to trickle back, determined to launch the rebuilding process, the tasks were immediate and daunting. How could a city begin to recover after a disaster of such cataclysmic force and devastation? Perhaps more to the point, *what* exactly does it recover?

Recovering after disaster

Cities are characterized not only by their buildings and infrastructure—they are fundamentally composed of interlocking relationships, types of leadership, social and political activities, historic legacies and attitudes, and particular ways of getting things done. In the weeks and months to come, all these would come into play as New Orleans confronted the most complex challenge in its 300-year history.

Within days of Katrina, the Rockefeller Foundation made more than $3 million in commitments aimed at the rebuilding of New Orleans. The grants were made to proven community-development and housing intermediaries that were pursuing strategies for housing and businesses. Nearly all other leading foundations collectively pledged hundreds of millions of dollars as well, and money and other resources flowed in from a wide range of donors to support immediate relief efforts.

But as attention began to focus on longer-range challenges, a number of factors particular to New Orleans came to the forefront. Despite its rich and vibrant culture, pre-Katrina New Orleans was one of the poorest cities in the U.S. For decades leading up to the hurricane, the city's manufacturing base had atrophied, leaving a weak employment environment, diminished tax revenues and widespread poverty, along with a legacy of failing education and health care—a variety of large holes in the social safety net.

Devastation in the Lower Ninth Ward.

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Huge swaths of the city were characterized by lower-income, segregated neighborhoods, mostly African-American, with dilapidated housing and high crime rates. Politically, the city was steeped in an old world culture of insularity and patronage, with little precedent of cooperation between city and state officials.

Reconstructing such a city would mean accepting profound changes to its identity. More than rebuilding the shattered infrastructure, more than replacing streets and sewers, schools and parks, it would mean acknowledging that the new city would be a different place, with possibly fewer residents, a different economic base, perhaps a somewhat different sense of itself. At the same time, the reconstruction process held out the prospect of a better city—one that would be more open and collaborative, and that would extend more opportunities to its residents for self-determination. Yet the path to achieve those goals was uncertain. As New Orleans community organizer Barbara Major put it, "How do you rebuild a city with equity? There is no manual."

A city's identity changes

In these dire circumstances, the city's planning process got under way. It began with citizen action. By late September 2005, in some neighborhoods—mostly in the wealthier, less ravaged areas—returning residents began taking matters into their own hands, meeting in their living rooms, drawing up their own plans and, in some cases, bringing in experts.

In October, Mayor Ray Nagin established a civic commission, called the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Within a short time, the commission had hired a nonprofit research and education group, the Urban Land Institute (ULI), to make large-scale land use suggestions for the future of the city. At the core of the ULI proposals, presented at a public forum in November, was that rebuilding should begin on higher ground in the less-damaged neighborhoods, and that the city's footprint should shrink to adapt to the new environmental realities.

The plan immediately ignited a furor. Members of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission were shouted down as "land thieves" for proposing to eliminate neighborhoods in some of the city's lowest-lying ground. Many residents in some of the areas responded with hostility to the suggestion that their neighborhoods—New Orleans East, the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly—would be abandoned for green space. To some, such proposals seemed to represent how some residents of the city had historically been exploited pre-Katrina, and were again being exploited post-Katrina.

Within weeks, the plan had run into so much opposition it was discarded, and the mayor eventually made the decision that all neighborhoods in New Orleans would be allowed to rebuild.

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Meanwhile, the Governor had established the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) to coordinate the statewide redevelopment response to Katrina and Rita, including raising private underwriting funds, retaining professional planners and moving toward a comprehensive statewide recovery plan. The LRA, by congressional mandate, would also serve as the conduit for federal relief funds for long-term recovery.

Teams of professional planners hired by the LRA began the planning process for storm-ravaged parishes across the coast of South Louisiana, with the sole exception of Orleans Parish, the parish that is the city of New Orleans. The Mayor had indicated that the city of New Orleans would not be part of the LRA planning effort. Rather, the Commission would initiate a new planning process to be underwritten by FEMA.

By January, yet another planning process was initiated, this time by the New Orleans City Council, which hired its own planning firm to focus only on the so-called "wet" neighborhoods. That was the designation given to those areas that had been covered with at least two feet of water—criteria that excluded 31 of the city's 73 neighborhoods.

Rather than a coherent and comprehensive plan, what was emerging was a patchwork of planning activities. It was characterized by flashes of energy and enterprise as weeks went by and more and more residents streamed back to the city. As a *New York Times* article later observed, there was an urge to rebuild "that is as primal as the force that pushes grass up through the cracks in the sidewalk." Determined individuals were obtaining building permits and getting down to work on their homes.

At the same time, the process was riddled with uncertainty. Still unresolved were critical questions about funding, FEMA flood maps and land elevation, insurance, and whether neighborhoods would ever achieve the density necessary to sustain reconstruction.

Perhaps it was inevitable, given the scale of the disaster and the multiplicity of players, that the process would eventually run into a log-jam. To create a successful New Orleans plan, there needed to be a unified, cooperative and communally spirited planning process. A healthy, functional New Orleans could never emerge by cobbling together 73 different neighborhood plans without comprehensive guidelines. Successful municipalities require an interrelated network of city-wide resources such as transportation, sewage, drainage, transit, utilities, parks, hospitals and schools. That's not what was operating in New Orleans in early 2006. What was needed was a vision and the mandate to chart a future course for the entire city.

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The French Quarter empty of nightlife.

A unified planning process

Lacking in New Orleans was a force that would bring all the disparate parts together. The mayor's office, the city council, the LRA—each had its own priorities, its own vision of the future. All too often, those visions did not mesh, and there was little inclination to accommodate. People were entrenched in their positions.

In January, FEMA notified Mayor Nagin that it would not provide the funds necessary to underwrite the planning process. Given the lack of public resources, the mayor, his Commission and many local leaders began to recognize the urgent need for some sort of private assistance to advance the process.

In late March, the LRA and the Greater New Orleans Foundation (GNOF), an established community foundation, invited the Rockefeller Foundation's director of domestic programs, Darren Walker, to New Orleans to discuss the possibility of funding assistance.

This was a commitment that fit squarely into the Rockefeller Foundation's philanthropic agenda. For nearly half a century, the health of American cities has been at the heart of the Foundation's domestic programs. A wide-ranging program in promoting urban design studies spurred the creation of new departments at a number of leading universities, and Jane Jacobs's landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was funded by a

Clean-up crew in a destroyed home.

Rockefeller Foundation grant. Through our grantmaking, the Foundation aspires to make material improvements in the lives and opportunities of poor or vulnerable people.

Walker accepted the invitation to the meeting, with the proviso that it be an inclusive gathering, one that would be attended by key players across the spectrum: representatives of the governor's and the mayor's offices, local philanthropic groups, community organizers, business leaders, neighborhood activists—a true reflection of the city's diverse interests.

In late March, all these constituents gathered in a conference room in GNOF's offices on the edge of downtown New Orleans. As GNOF's president and CEO Ben Johnson observed, "It was like bringing together all the different spokes of the wheel to focus on the hub."

Out of that meeting emerged two elements that would jump-start the planning process and focus efforts on a more comprehensive effort. First, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, eventually pegged at $3.5 million, was made to the GNOF. That commitment immediately triggered a grant from the GNOF itself for an additional $1 million, bringing to $4.5 million the total committed to a new plan.

The Rockefeller grant represents an unusual form of public/private partnership…and serves as a powerful catalyst for change.

Second, the Rockefeller Foundation recruited and dispatched a program officer to New Orleans to oversee the administration of the grant and serve as a resource for local stakeholders. Carey Shea was a seasoned community-development expert well versed in the complexities of urban planning. A one-time homeowner in New Orleans, she was also an outsider whose neutrality would eventually emerge as a powerful organizational asset. The ability of a leading individual to serve as a sounding board would prove to be invaluable as the process—now known as the Unified New Orleans Plan—was nudged forward.

The Rockefeller grant, then, represented an unusual form of public/private partnership, one that helped align the critical players, from the state and the regional to the local level, and served as a powerful catalyst for change.

A public/private partnership

Over the weeks and months that followed, many observers began to notice a shift taking place in New Orleans, a rearrangement of the fundamental way that things were done. A multitude of stakeholders, driven by the imperative to revive their city, and fueled by an impatience with the discord and dysfunction that had prevailed for so many years, began to plan consensually.

No longer would they tolerate destructive squabbling among various constituents while thousands of their fellow citizens were still living in trailers, desperate to rebuild their homes. People were determined to bring a new level of transparency and urgency to city planning. Things were going to be different.

The financial resources of the Rockefeller Foundation, together with a neutral individual on the ground, served as the fulcrum of a lever that could propel the city into a new direction, infused with hope and optimism, but tempered by the reality of overcoming long-standing divisions based on race and class. One leading urban planner called it "a stunning sequence of events."

Beginning in early August 2006, the GNOF and its new New Orleans Community Support Foundation opened the doors to a series of public meetings, with the objective of selecting the planners who would help determine the look and shape of the emerging city, from streets and sidewalks to bus routes, schools, parks and libraries. The mayor, governor, state Recovery Authority and City Council were finally working together to advance the Unified New Orleans Plan, which will, when completed and submitted to the LRA, release critically needed federal recovery funds.

Where does the rebuilding of New Orleans stand today? After months of frustration and struggle, the planning process is advancing, fueled by increased civic dialogue, broad-based participation and a commitment to collective accountability.

The immense challenge facing New Orleans impels all involved to recognize their mutual interests and interdependence…

Returning to a house unmoored.

Even so, the Unified New Orleans Plan entails considerable risk for all involved, for there can be no guarantee of ultimate success. Without doubt, some of the old frictions remain. Entrenched patterns, characterized by race and class divides, cannot so easily be dissolved. In a city still marked by suffering, in which many thousands are still displaced and in distress, and where emotions are still raw, there will continue to be good days, and less good days. The process remains at times disjointed. Many local institutions and some local leaders continue to lack trust in one another.

Everyone knows that rebuilding New Orleans will require an extraordinary amount of hard work. But beyond that, as Martin Luther King Jr. observed, all humanity is "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."

The immense challenge facing New Orleans impels all involved to recognize their mutual interests and interdependence, and in so doing, coalesce around a civic plan that will carry their community into the future—buoyed by the conviction that the people of New Orleans deserve, and must have, a brighter future. For New Orleans, after a long and difficult year, it might be said that the Unified New Orleans Plan heralds the end of the beginning.

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All photographs taken December 2005 by Jonas Bendiksen